

Angel Fire, New Mexico. The prediction was wrong back in the 1960s that citizens were going to be sorry when the wooly operators stopped raising lamb chops and coyotes moved into the city limits. The prophesy should have read that herders are going to go broke feeding old cows the first drouth, and city people are going to eat Australian lamb marinated in French wine.

My outfit loaded the last ewes in 2002, as has been reported nearly 2002 times in this space. Been more tears shed over O.J. Simpson's plight than the certain, gradual demise of this noble industry that supported so many of us for so many decades.

Thirty days after the old ewes left, tracks and signs washed or blew away from around the waterings, obliterating 75 years of sheep ranching. Black cows took over the shade trees; black birds lined nests with the last of the dead wool. Now on this, the 29th of August, I called home and ordered a truck to haul 50 more young cows to slaughter.

One thing I was right about back then is that the shortgrass country can not depend on cattle. The past 13 months of dry weather proves my point. We weaned our calves

early. The mommas never recovered this summer, even on full feed and without the calves nursing.

All the way from Mertzon into New Mexico seemed the same sad song. Only one flock of a hundred head of shorn ewes with baby lambs grazed by the roadside. What cattle were visible from the road summered thin and in cases barren. (Calves shipped or cows dry?)

Coyotes must have been denned. None crossed the road or watched through the fences. The newspapers reported a mysterious death of a protected mother gray wolf at Silver City, way over on the Arizona line. "She," the report said, "raised five pups every year. An investigation was underway."

Same issue said the new lady governor qualified for a concealed weapon license down at Santa Fee with a .38 special and a .45 Colt automatic. I looked under the car seat and patted down my pockets to be sure I was clean before I thought more about the wolf mystery or the pistol-packing governor.

Vultures had been roosting in the pine trees by the Mertzon house. Be just like one of my grandsons to leave a box of dove hunting shells in the car. Even though I'd come closer to stealing a little blind kid's tricycle than violating the law shooting a firearm within the city

limits, sometimes it's hard to break the habits from living on a ranch. (This far along in the article, can you still detect the humiliation of having taken the wrong road from Santa Fe and ending up in a cold spell in Angel Fire?)

Twenty years ago, I'd have been a suspect, guilty by association with herders up here. Hombres then in New Mexico fought hard to run sheep in a losing battle with predators. Wolf fanciers would have been mighty scant among the wool growers.

Not much further back, New Mexico governors didn't bother with permits, pistol or otherwise. His Honor might have carried a driver's license if the driver's license office was convenient to his parking place.

Bears made the news this trip, too. Big debate carried on whether to increase the kill during hunting season because of the black bears starving or reduce the kill because of the die-off. An old boy at one of the concerts here in Angel Fire said a bear broke into his garage three nights in a row. Dog food caused the starving animal to tear down the garage door.

I called the Angel Fire Chamber of Commerce the next morning after the concert. The lady said the bears starved for food on the other side of the mountains. She said where there were berries and fruit, (orchards) they survived or

did quite well; but now a starved 45-pound bear from the dry side of the mountain range had been killed that should have weighed 160 pounds.

She said not to shoot within the city limits (Buzzard stories that far from Mertzson?), adding that out of state visitors don't know New Mexico law. She further volunteered that control people showed up after the bears had left.

She gave the same feeling 90 percent of the Chamber of Commerce people do, that this was a big bother to answer my questions. Matters didn't improve when I said, "Sis, don't worry; I won't quote you as being a bear expert." (Note, catalogue "Sis" for circumstances already lost. Mother McCree would react unfavorably to being called "Sis".)

The goal now is to leave town without taking sides or being committed. If the bears are hungry, what is on tap for the herders?